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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: SOCIALISTS RETAIN STRONG LEAD FOR JUNE ELECTION, BUT PM'S PARTY GAINING SLOWLY

Ref: (A) SOFIA 00333, (B) SOFIA 00242, (C) 2004 SOFIA 002174,
(D) 2004 SOFIA 00886, (E) 2004 SOFIA 00432

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Support for Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg and his ruling party has slowly but steadily increased over the past year, and the former king was named by a plurality as the preferred candidate to lead the next government, according to a survey by the International Republican Institute. However, poll data indicates that time and expected low turnout still favor the better-organized Socialists. The survey, carried out in mid-March, showed that although the gap is narrowing, the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) remains the frontrunner in the election with a nearly 10-percent lead over the ruling National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS). The narrowing gap suggests the parliamentary elections will be hotly contested, and the race for first place will be between the Socialists and the ex-king's movement. The weakened and fractious center-right seems, at least at this stage, to be out of the game. The IRI survey also showed falling support for membership in NATO and a lack of public support for U.S. bases in Bulgaria, both attributed to Bulgaria's unpopular military involvement in Iraq. END SUMMARY

NMSS: IMPROVING YET UNCERTAIN CHANCES

12. (SBU) Simeon Saxe-Coburg's liberal coalition is on its way to become only the second post-communist government to complete its full four-year term in office. The percentage of those who believe Simeon's team deserves re-election increased to 25.4 percent in March from 19.1 percent a year earlier. In March 2005, the majority of Bulgarians (58 percent compared to 27 percent a year ago) believe that Saxe-Coburg does a good or very good job as PM, while the number of those who say he does a very bad job fell sharply to 4.0 percent from 20 percent. The poll also showed the former monarch to be the preferred future prime minister with 17.6 percent support, slightly ahead of the young Socialist leader, Sergei Stanishev, with 16.8 percent, and well ahead of center-right opposition leaders.

WELL-ORGANIZED SOCIALISTS RETAIN LEAD

13. (SBU) If elections were held now, the BSP would win the greatest number of seats in the next parliament, although falling short of an absolute majority. The BSP lead over the NMSS was 9.2 percent in March, when support for the Socialists stood at 23.1 percent against 13.9 percent for the NMSS. The well-organized BSP, the political party with the longest tradition and the most developed regional structures, has enjoyed consistently high support over the past year. A total of 36 percent say the BSP deserves a chance to govern the country, against 27 percent for the NMSS and 15 percent for the opposition center-right Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). The BSP has the most monolithic electorate, with 91 percent vote retention since the 2001 election. Its support consists predominantly of pensioners, people with a high-school education or less, and those living in small towns and villages. In contrast, the NMSS enjoys its highest support levels among 23 to 34 year-olds and high school/college graduates. Although it retains only 32 percent of its 2001 vote, the NMSS has a much higher electoral reserve, giving it the potential ability to reach out to centrist and undecided voters, as well as disillusioned rightwing supporters.

DISTRESSING NEWS FOR THE CENTER-RIGHT

14. (SBU) The weakened center-right continued to lose ground as fractious opposition leaders failed to overcome political and personal differences. Electoral support for the UDF stood at a mere 5.4 percent in March, perhaps the lowest levels since it began leading the anti-communist opposition in 1989. Ex-PM Kostov's party, the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, and the party of Sofia Mayor Stefan Sofianski (the Union of Free Democrats or UFD) have electoral support of 2.6 and 3.3 percent respectively, meaning that their chances to cross the four percent threshold and enter the next parliament are uncertain. The centrist New Time, a NMSS splinter group that became a

junior coalition partner following the February cabinet reshuffle, has support of 1.5 percent. Its chances to enter the next parliament are minimal unless it strikes a pre-election deal with the NMSS or the other governing-coalition partner, the ethnic-Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).

LOW TURNOUT FAVORS SOCIALISTS

15. (U) A total of 67 percent say they plan to vote in the

June general elections, while 30 percent say they will not go to the polls and 3.0 percent don't know. Low turnout will favor the Socialists, who have the most disciplined electorate. Bulgaria's complicated proportional representation system gives an additional bonus to the winning party, which gets the lion's share of the redistributed votes of parties that don't make the four percent threshold to enter parliament. Therefore, the possibility that the BSP will win an absolute majority in case of low turnout cannot be completely excluded.

SUPPORT FOR NATO AND U.S. BASES SLIPPING

17. (SBU) Support for Bulgaria's membership in the EU rose to 77 percent in March, up eight percent from a year ago, as Bulgaria prepared to sign its accession treaty on April 25 and join the Union in 2007. This rise follows a similar trend in other EU aspirant states where support for the EU membership peaked on the eve of signing the EU accession papers. Support for Bulgaria's membership in NATO, however, dropped to 52 percent in March from 62 percent a year ago, when Bulgaria joined the North-Atlantic military alliance. Pollsters linked the drop to the predominantly negative attitudes in Bulgaria towards the country's military participation in Iraq. Similarly, the polls showed that the majority of Bulgarians now oppose U.S. troops using bases in Bulgaria. A total of 61 percent disapprove of U.S. bases in Bulgaria, up from 50 percent a year ago. In addition to the unpopular war in Iraq, much of the increased opposition to stationing U.S. forces in Bulgaria can be attributed to the government's failure so far to explain the issue adequately to the public.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: While the former king's party is rising in the polls, it is still considered the underdog, largely because of poorly developed regional structures, lack of party organization and weak leadership at the top. If the gap between the Socialists and the NMSS continues to narrow the 2005 election could be a hotly contested affair. However, if the NMSS makes no further progress against the Socialists, the BSP will likely win a plurality of seats but fall short of a majority needed to form a government. Nearly three months before the elections, two things are clear: the next government will likely be a coalition, and it will be led by either the BSP or the NMSS, with today's smart money being placed on the BSP. END COMMENT

19. (U) TABLE: If elections were held now, for which party would you cast your vote? (respondents answer through secret ballot)

Party	March 2005 (%)
BSP	23.1
NMSS	13.9
MRF	5.8
UDF-DP-St.George's Day	5.4
UFD-BANU-IMRO	3.3
DSB (Ivan Kostov)	2.6
Evreroma	2.0
New Time	1.5
NMRF	1.3
Bulgarian Communist Party	1.1
Other	3.5
Have not decided	3.6
Will not vote	29.4